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PROGRAM CBS Evening News

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SUBJECT U.S. Backing and Nicaragua

BOB SCHIEFFER: Nicaragua's Sandinista government claimed today that it has crushed an attempt by Honduran-based rebels to open a new front along the Atlantic. But the rebels, reportedly with U.S. backing, continue to make trouble for the Managua regime. CBS News has received the first reports of their activity in Honduras and Nicaragua since they launched an invasion about two weeks ago.

Tonight, Bill McLaughlin, in Washington, takes a look at these Nicaraguan counterrevolutionaries.

BILL MCLAUGHLIN: The Honduran Government claims they do not exist. The U.S. Government refuses to confirm or deny its support for them.

This is one of them, a guerrilla training camp in Honduras less than ten miles from the Nicaraguan border. It was filmed over the past two weeks by a free-lance camera crew sent to the area by CBS News. It is one of several camps operating openly in Honduras.

The officers and recruits are predominantly Nicaraguans devoted to one aim, the violent overthrow of the Sandinist regime in their homeland. Many of the officers and trainers were members of Nicaragua's National Guard under the dictator Anastasio Somoza. One trainer left his wife and job in Houston, Texas to help rid his country of what he believes is now a Marxist dictatorship.

The recruits are mostly young peasants from northern Nicaragua. They're all well-equipped, brand-new weapons, uniforms and packs. And their training is as close to the real

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thing as possible. The camp seems to have an inexhaustible supply of live ammunition.

They are the classic weapons of the guerrilla: automatic rifles, machine guns, and nothing heavier than mortars and rocket-propelled grenade launchers, the weapons of hit-and-run squads.

This camp is run by the anti-Sandinist movement called the Democratic Nicaraguan Forces. One of its leaders is Edgar Chamorro.

EDGAR CHAMORRO: Our first objective will be to overthrow the Sandinista by July.

MCLAUGHLIN: This guerrilla group is setting out on a regular patrol into Nicaragua. It will take them 35 miles into the northern Nicaraguan province of Nueva Segovia. These forays often end up with new recruits, peasants fed up with the Sandinista regime's economic policies. This patrol picked up four new members, including a 57-year-old former National Guardsman whose entire family has joined the rebels.

When questioned, the counterrevolutionaries have the same answer: They are fighting for God and against Communism.

The patrol ends up at a hidden camp inside Nicaragua. A field radio connects the camp to the main headquarters back in Honduras.

The man in charge is Commandante Bravo. He claims he leads 800 of the estimated two to three thousand anti-Sandinist rebels inside Nicaragua. Bravo is an ex-National Guardsman who believes victory is not far away. One reason, he says, American aid.

Edgar Chamorro believes the United States could do more to help his rebels oust the Nicaraguan government.

CHAMORRO: I am rather disappointed with the way the United States looks at the problems in Central America, and in particular Nicaragua.

MCLAUGHLIN: But there are those in both Nicaragua and Washington who believe the U.S. is already doing much too much to help the rebels. In our next report, we'll examine the American connection along the Nicaraguan frontline.